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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers are faced with so many writing textbooks on the market that it indeed seems useful to examine them in detail, looking for any distinguishing characteristics as well as commonalities. A content analysis focused on one aspect of the 24 argument texts available: the sample arguments they include. The texts contained a grand total of 1,152 essays, an average of 48 essays per book. Nobody would expect any one essay to be found in every book, but it seemed sensible to expect overlap. However, the overwhelming majority of essays appeared just once. A mere 61 of the 1,152 essays (5.3%) appeared more than one time. Only seven appear in more than four textbooks. A number of political, pedagogical, and marketing reasons explain why these seven essays appear relatively often, but the fact remains that these essays, especially the top three, are likely to be treated as models of argumentation. A closer look at their commonalities might shed some light on what is valued in terms of argument. The essays have much in common, such as a clear stance on a controversial issue, considerable support for the author's position, and a grounding in a specific context and exigency. Four common traits are worthy of analysis because they are not as obvious: (1) tone or ethos; (2) style; (3) multiplicity; and (4) rights and responsibilities. It does not appear that textbook writers have decided on a canon for arguments, but this may be a healthy sign of diversity. (TB)

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A Canon for Argumentation?

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For a previous issue of *Composition Chronicle*, I wrote an article on trends among ten college-level textbooks that focus on argumentation ("Textbooks on Argumentative Writing...." *Composition Chronicle* 8.2, 1995, pp. 1-4.). Since that time, more such texts have appeared, and some colleagues who expressed interest in the findings of my first article encouraged me to follow up by examining a wider range of current texts. Composition teachers are faced with so many writing textbooks on the market that it indeed seems useful to examine them in detail, looking for any distinguishing characteristics as well as commonalties. Not a glamorous task perhaps, but one that can be valuable for teachers trying to see the trees within the forest.

As with my earlier article, I wish to avoid an explicit evaluation of textbooks and focus instead on describing trends. This present analysis, though, examines only one aspect of argument texts: the sample arguments they include. Some teachers complain that anthologies contain basically the same essays. Having read more than one textbook proposal that consisted of photocopies of essays found in competing textbooks, I too found myself wondering how much overlap exists. Such overlap is not necessarily bad. In fact, it might be interesting to determine if there is an argumentative canon of sorts—a group of essays that reflect widespread agreement about what constitutes a "good" argument, or what group of arguments have a special place in the academic culture.

Of course, there are many ways to determine if such a canon exists, but it seems reasonable that textbooks, since they are based on what supposedly will appeal to a large market, will offer a powerful clue. Hence, I examined a group of college-level argument textbooks that are currently available for adoption, that represent a range of publishers, and that contain sample arguments.

The definition of "argument" is not altogether clear, but it seems obvious that the essential component is that an argument should take a stance on an issue in an attempt to secure agreement. The types of proof, organization, and style may vary greatly, however. For instance, some people might assume that an emotional appeal is not suitable support for an argument, while others might say it is as important as logic in terms of securing agreement. Because my study examines what is presented to students as models of argument, I am assuming a broad definition of argumentation that hinges on what textbook authors decide to call an argument. In fact, what is and is not considered an argument may be just as much a matter of convention as a matter of the apparent intent of a given essay. One way of better defining this genre, then, is by examining some common features of what people decide to call "an argument." After presenting quantitative information on the textbooks, I will turn to a rhetorical analysis that explores some of these common features.

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The Textbooks

I examined a range of writing textbooks and examined their contents, but I found that the title of a text is the best indication if it is intended to focus on argumentation. I gathered and analyzed as many available texts as possible by contacting publishers, but given the ongoing changes in the market, there will be some texts I have missed. However, the 24 selections shown in the following list represent the bulk of the argument texts available. Some are basically essay anthologies, with perhaps a bit of apparatus and commentary on how to write an argument. Other texts are devoted to discussing argumentation and include sample essays as a secondary feature. When a publisher offered a short as well as a long version of a text, I analyzed only the longer version since the extra length was typically devoted to additional sample essays.

Argument Textbooks Containing Sample Essays

Barnet, Sylvan, and Hugo Bedau. *Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings*, 4th ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996.

Batteiger, Richard P. *Writing and Reading Arguments: A Rhetoric and Reader.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994.

Bradbury, Nancy Mason, and Arthur Quinn. *Audiences and Intentions: A Book of Arguments*, 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1994.

Crusius, Timothy W., and Carolyn E. Channell. *The Aims of Argument: A Rhetoric and Reader.* Mountain View: Mayfield, 1995.

Clark, Irene L. *Writing About Diversity: An Argument Reader and Guide*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Fahnestock, Jeanne, and Marie Secor. *A Rhetoric of Argument*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990.

Fairbanks, A. Harris. *Fact, Value, Policy: Reading and Writing Arguments*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

Gage, John T. *The Shape of Reason: Argumentative Writing in College*, 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1991.

Goshgarian, Gary, and Kathleen Krueger. *Crossfire: An Argument Rhetoric and Reader*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

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Hatch, Gary Layne. *Arguing in Communities*. Mountain View: Mayfield, 1996.

Hicks, Stephen R. C., and David Kelley. *The Art of Reasoning: Readings for Logical Analysis*. New York: Norton, 1994.

Hirschberg, Stuart. *Essential Strategies of Argument*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996.

—. *Strategies of Argument*, 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996.

McDonald, Daniel, and Larry W. Burton. *The Language of Argument*, 8th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Miller, Robert K. *The Informed Argument: A Multidisciplinary Reader and Guide*, 4th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

Moore, Brooke Noel. *Making Your Case: Critical Thinking and the Argumentative Essay*. Mountain View: Mayfield, 1995.

Montoya, Candace G., and Joan Mariner Roxberg. *Thinking and Writing Persuasively: A Basic Guide*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995.

Muller, Erik. *Opening Arguments: A Brief Rhetoric with Readings*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Nicholas, Karl J., and James R. Nicholl. *Effective Argument: A Writer's Guide with Readings*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1991.

Ramage, John D., and John C. Bean. *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*, 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995.

Rottenberg, Annette T. *Elements of Argument: A Text and Reader*, 4th ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1994.

Seyler, Dorothy U. *Understanding Arguments: A Text with Readings*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

Stay, Byron L. *A Guide to Argumentative Writing*. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1996.

Vesterman, William. *Reading and Writing Short Arguments*. Mountain View: Mayfield, 1994.

The Sample Arguments

The next step was a tedious cataloguing of essays appearing in these texts.* I elected not to include student samples because they were relatively rare and unlikely to be duplicated from one textbook to another. Nor did I include brief excerpts taken from an essay or book. A few texts included narrative and literary works that may not resemble a conventional argument, but I trusted the authors' and editors' judgments and counted any work intended in one way or another to reflect elements of argumentation or persuasion.

The 24 texts include a grand total of 1,152 essays—an average of 48 essays per book. Nobody would expect any one essay to be found in every book, but it seemed sensible to expect a notable amount of overlap. To my surprise, the overwhelming majority of essays appeared just once. A mere 61 of 1,152 essays (5.3%) appeared more than one time, as indicated below.

How Many Essays Appeared More Than Once?

Essays appearing once	1,091 (94.7%)
Essays appearing twice	45 (3.9%)
Essays appearing three times	9 (.7%)
Essays appearing four to nine times	7 (.6%)

Despite this tremendous diversity, the agreement reached is worth discussing, especially in terms of those essays falling within the last category above (the four-to-nine times range). Although these seven selections are a tiny portion of the 1,152 essays, they reflect what agreement there exists among the texts in terms of what constitutes a model argument. If their inclusion in these textbooks is any reflection whatsoever of how often these essays are actually assigned and read, these essays might indeed represent widespread values and assumptions about effective argumentation.

Below (in the box at the bottom of the page) is a listing of the most common sample arguments, the top three of which should come as little surprise.

A Closer Look at the Top Essays

A number of political, pedagogical, and marketing reasons explain why these seven essays appear relatively often, but the fact remains that these essays—especially the "top three"—are likely to be treated as models of argumentation. A closer look at their commonalties might shed some light on what is valued in terms of argument.

The essays have much in common that we would expect, such as a clear stance on controversial issues, considerable support for the writer's position, and a grounding in a specific context and exigency (e.g., the American Revolution and the struggle for minority rights in the 1960s). But I wish to summarize four common traits that might not be as obvious: (1) tone/ethos, (2) style, (3) multiplicity, and (4) rights and responsibilities.

***Tone/Ethos*:** The essays are excellent examples of logic, but even the most eminently logical person can be abrupt or rude. However, all seven essays take extra steps to suggest that there is a highly reasonable, respectful person writing the essay—an ethos of

Which Essays Appeared Most Often?

Title	Author	Frequency
"Letter from a Birmingham Jail"	Martin Luther King	9 textbooks
"A Modest Proposal"	Jonathan Swift	9 textbooks
"Declaration of Independence"	Thomas Jefferson et al.	8 textbooks
"Animal Liberation"	Peter Singer	5 textbooks
"The Case for Torture"	Michael Levin	5 textbooks
"Crito"	Plato	4 textbooks
"Declaration of Sentiments"	Elizabeth Cady Stanton	4 textbooks

fairness, judiciousness, and trustworthiness. For instance, Martin Luther King, even while unjustly imprisoned, patiently addresses the severe criticisms made by his audience, Jonathan Swift lays out a horrific proposal but does so in a way that makes him seem caring and kind, and Thomas Jefferson avoids attacking the English people, focusing instead on condemning the King. In such ways, these authors establish a trusting relationship between themselves and their readers.

But how many argument textbooks give substantive attention to explicitly discussing tone? While the model essays implicitly send a message about the role of ethos and tone, rarely do the textbooks devote much attention to advising student writers how to create an effective ethos or tone. The vast majority of texts focus on logic and offer few remarks, if any, on ethos. Granted, tone and ethos may not lend themselves to explicit teaching in the way that logic does. However, being fair, reasonable, and polite may, as Aristotle suggested centuries ago, be as much a hallmark of effective argumentation as any other element of discourse.

***Style*:** Closely related to ethos and tone is style—the way in which words and sentences are crafted. And again, the sample essays seem to reflect an aspect of writing that many textbooks and teachers downplay. In particular, the essays are written in a style that is, admittedly, difficult for students to achieve: the formal style. Such a style has its own variants, but in general it is marked by complex wording and syntax. For example, Martin Luther King is well known for his use of figures of speech, but the other authors also use an elevated style that lends itself to their purposes. In "A Modest Proposal," the narrator's complex syntax and wording help create the persona of an educated, intelligent person. Both "Declarations" involve a sophisticated style that makes it clear that the marginalized people proclaiming independence are not crude, unintelligent upstarts. And Plato's high style is what we would expect from a scholar and philosopher.

While the formal style is not appropriate for all occasions, it is interesting that it is the style presented in all these model arguments. Even more interestingly, style is another element that seems to receive little in the way of direct attention not only in argument textbooks but in the leading composition journals. Perhaps our students need not be masters of the formal style, but the attention the authors give to style and adapting it to their situations suggest that stylistics is an overlooked part of writing instruction.

***Multiplicity*:** Although each essay has a specific focus and stance, it is also clear that the seven essays reflect a complex approach to writing that acknowledges multiple layers of purposes, audiences, and forms.

Consider how the essays are not always what they seem on first reading, much like a work of literature. At the surface, King's audience is comprised of particular individuals in the clergy, and his apparent purpose is to defend himself against their charges. But his essay at a deeper level is also an attack on so-called moderates. Swift's essay looks like a proposal for dealing with poverty but is in reality a damning critique of the ruling class. Both Jefferson's and Stanton's "Declarations" have complex purposes; they are both self-expression ("We exist") as well as argumentation ("We have been unjustly treated"). Both have multiple layers of readers; Stanton, for instance, was directly addressing a convention audience of feminists but also seems to be making an argument to male power holders in the US. Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation" appeared as a book review, but it is recognized as a seminal argument for animals' rights. And in "Crito," Plato appears to be describing a dialectic discussion in which Socrates examines the reasons why he will not escape from prison, but the piece is a philosophical argument on the primacy of ethical principles. The multiplicity of "Crito" even extends to authorship: Is the author Plato, or is he merely presenting the ideas of Socrates?

In such ways, these essays indicate that excellence in writing means more than achieving a single purpose, addressing one specified audience, and neatly following within one and only one genre. Perhaps many students struggle with achieving one straightforward purpose in writing an argument, but the model essays indicate that excellence in writing means being able to maintain a clear focus and purpose while recognizing the multiple layers of goals and readers for a given text.

***Rights & Responsibilities*:** All seven essays deal with some facet of individuals' rights—and the responsibility that people should have for preserving the rights of others. King argues for the rights of minorities and non-violent protesters, Swift's satire speaks for the rights of the poor, Jefferson addresses the rights of colonists and the responsibilities of governments, Singer argues for animal rights, Levin questions the rights of terrorists, and Plato weighs the rights and responsibilities of citizens in terms of adhering to the law.

These essays, as well as a great many others of the 1,152 essays, directly deal with rights, the abuse of power, and injustice. Since the concept of "rights" has the status of a god term in American culture, it is natural that this issue would arise, but its prevalence throughout all 24 texts is nonetheless striking and gives rise to some interesting questions. What political messages are being sent as a whole given this focus on rights? As some feminist theories suggest, is there so much of an emphasis on obtaining one's own rights that too little attention is given to recognizing the responsibilities the individual has to a community? And to what extent are composition students encouraged (or allowed) to directly address similar issues of rights and responsibilities? Specifically, how often are students encouraged to argue for their own rights within the composition classroom?

Final Observations

It does not appear that textbook writers have firmly decided on a canon for arguments, but maybe that is for the best. There are too many ways of making meaning to suggest that students should follow a prescribed set of argumentative strategies. The overall lack of agreement among the 24 texts, then, may actually be a healthy sign of diversity.

Despite this diversity, the seven essays that appear relatively often can be telling—a way of determining if what we hold up as models of excellence bears any resemblance to what we tell students to do. It would be interesting to examine these "biggest hits of argumentation" in more detail and determine the messages they send students, the extent to which they reflect contemporary theories of composition, and the ways in which teachers and students actually use sample essays.

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